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**Sunday 9 October 2022 to Sunday 16 October 2022**

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Sunday 9 October 2022

# Rejected to accepted

by Sonia Hulme

**Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no-one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? (Luke 17:17,18)**

Read Luke 17:11–19

In our house, we have a rule. When dinner is over, everyone who ate should stick around and help clean up. That’s how we show gratitude to the cook. It’s amazing, then, how many nights the cook can identify with Jesus’ question in today’s story of the healing of the ten lepers. In our family, it translates to ‘Were not all seven fed? Where are the other six??’. Yes, despite the rule and without us noticing, children seem to slip away and must be retrieved from all over the house to wash, dry and put away the mess of the day. The very act of coming back shows gratitude, especially if they do it without being forced (we’re still working on that!).

The leper who returned to give thanks after receiving miraculous healing from Jesus was an outsider on not one but two counts. Firstly, he was from Samaria. According to the Jews, he was not included in God’s family. Secondly, he had an illness that resulted in complete social rejection. So, he really did know about life on the edge of society, and his gratitude is correspondingly heartfelt.

Over and over, Jesus specialises in going to the margins, to the outsider and drawing them in, including them, making them whole. In response, those who have been healed of much, forgiven much and loved much respond with great gratitude. I, too, was an outsider before Jesus came to me. Perhaps I still feel on the edge, rejected by others, invisible, unlovely in my own – or others’ – eyes. I am exactly the one he comes to touch and heal and love. He is not afraid of my wounds, sins, and shame. He embraces me, makes me whole and delights in my grateful response. My gratitude is a gift to him and a witness to the world of just how much he has done for me. I truly am a recipient of amazing grace!

**Before you came along, I, too, was an outsider in your kingdom. Help me look with eyes of compassion on those who are still lingering on the edge of your love. Let my gratitude show itself in my love for those who are unwelcome because they are different. Amen.**

Sonia lives in the north-eastern suburbs of Adelaide with her husband and five children. She works part-time in a support role at Good Shepherd Lutheran School and as a spiritual director, helping people discern God at work in their lives.

Monday 10 October 2022

# Get amongst it

by Sonia Hulme

**The Lord said to Moses, ‘These are the regulations for the diseased person… when he is brought to the priest. The priest is to go outside the camp and examine him’ (Leviticus 14:1–3a).**

Read Leviticus 14:1–20

Today’s reading contains a list of instructions for those struggling with infectious skin diseases, the great fear being a diagnosis of leprosy, resulting in complete social exclusion. After doing all that was required of them, people struggling in this way could only get a ‘clean bill of health’ by being examined by a priest. God used his spiritual leaders to minister to those struggling with physical illnesses that had massive social ramifications. They were instruments in his hands for ministry. Jesus (identified in the Book of Hebrews as the great High Priest) continued this ministry by dealing compassionately with people living with these isolating illnesses. He went beyond the spirit of his day by reaching out his hand and touching the leper in Luke 5, unheard of in a time when it was believed leprosy may spread by touch.

As we identify with him, we too are named ‘a chosen people, a royal priesthood’ (1 Peter 2:9). What might our priestly duties entail? Just as the Old Testament priests left their inner comforts and journeyed outside their comfortable, sickness-free camp, part of our calling is the invitation to minister to the people around us.

Where does our motivation come from? It comes from knowing that before we knew God, we too were ‘outside the camp’, separated from him in the sickness of sin. The same hand of mercy that touched us wants to use us to touch others and bring them healing in his name.

Do any ‘lepers’ spring to your mind today? Can you name one person you know who is despised by your social or church group? Someone who might feel unclean when they look at their past life and where they have been or feel shame when they are looked on by others? Or someone who might fear the reaction of others if they entered a church or gathering of Christians? Perhaps you are being called to go out of the camp, your comfortable church bubble, roll up your sleeves and get amongst it, working alongside the great High Priest who was not afraid to reach out and touch you.

***Thank you so much, Jesus, for being willing to enter our world and pronounce us clean through your death and resurrection. May the healing and mercy you poured out on us be poured out to others through us. Amen.***

Tuesday 11 October 2022

# Giving it up

by Sonia Hulme

**Then Hannah prayed and said: ‘My heart rejoices in the Lord’ (1 Samuel 2:1a).**

Read 1 Samuel 2:1–10

I once listened to an older friend describe the moment her first-born son left home to work in another state. ‘I watched him drive away and cried, thinking nothing in our family would ever be quite the same again. And it never was.’

Hannah would have understood. She had prayed for years for the gift of a child. She promised that if God granted her request, the child would be dedicated to God ‘all the days of his life’. After young Samuel was only just weaned, Hannah kept her promise, leaving him in the care of the priest Eli to be raised in service in the temple. Can you imagine what that was like? Can you imagine how her heart must have struggled to give away the gift she had only just received? And this is where her prayer in today’s passage is prayed! It is a prayer of 10 faith-filled verses proclaiming God’s goodness and his ability to reverse fortunes and bring hope where things seem hopeless.

What is remarkable about Hannah’s prayer is not perhaps what she prays (although it’s pretty amazing) but when she prays it. I don’t know about you, but I’m not often prone to spontaneous faith-filled outbursts in the most heart-wrenching moments of my life. When things are good, yes. When my heart is breaking? Not so much …

How did Hannah do it? How was she able to take her eyes off herself and put them back on God? Somehow, Hannah looked beyond the gift she was given and focused on the heart of the One who gave it to her in the first place. She staked her life on his character and his ability to work in the lives of the feeble, hungry, barren, poor and needy.

I don’t know what losses you are facing today, but I pray that you might have the courage to ‘do a Hannah’. Pour your heart out to him, and then spend some time remembering his character. Speak Hannah’s prayer out loud, proclaim the truth about your God, and see how that shapes your heart.

***Lord, you granted the desires of Hannah’s heart, and then she surrendered it all back to you. Help me hold your gifts freely and gratefully today. When my heart is struggling, remind me the truth of who you are and that your heart towards me is good. Amen.***

Wednesday 12 October 2022

# Can you keep a secret?

by Sonia Hulme

**Jesus warned them sternly, ‘See that no-one knows about this’. But they went out and spread the news about him all over that region’ (Matthew 9:30b,31).**

Read Matthew 9:27–38

Have you ever had an encounter that leaves you wanting to ‘spill the beans’? When our daughter’s boyfriend came recently to ask us if he could ask her to marry him, we gave him our wholehearted ‘Yes!’ But our young suitor asked us not to say anything to anyone for several weeks. He still had work to do before his plan could come to fruition. Buy a ring and plan a proposal. The timing had to be just right.

Perhaps Jesus was a bit the same. He knew that once his claimed identity became known, it would raise the ire of the religious leaders and set off a train of events that would lead to his death. And he still had work to do before that happened. The timing had to be just right. So, he made his request.

We managed to keep our secret, even though it was a lonely sort of joy. But these two men in the Scripture could not! Unlike many of the people around them with physical sight, these two somehow understood that this man they could not see was the long-awaited Messiah. They understood enough about Jesus’ identity to pursue him until, in his compassion, Jesus granted their request. They had received miraculous healing, freeing them from a lifetime of poverty and social isolation.

So, who am I more like? The ‘religious’ people of the day who could see Jesus physically but couldn’t understand what he was offering them? Or these two men who came from a place of nothing and received everything they needed to live a life of wholeness? Because if we really understand what we’ve been given and who gives it to us, we too will be unable to keep it a secret. We’ll want to spill the beans.

***Thank you, Jesus, that we do not have to keep our encounter with you a secret. Let it bubble up and spill out of us so that others may see and know for themselves the goodness we have met in you. Amen.***

Thursday 13 October 2022

# Missed it by THAT much …

by Sonia Hulme

**But Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it … because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works (Romans 9:31,32a).**

Read Romans 9:21–33

Am I the only person who finds that reading some parts of Romans messes with your brain?

Does the following paraphrase of it make more sense?

And Israel, who seemed so interested in reading and talking about what God was doing, missed it. How could they miss it? Because instead of trusting God, they took over … They were absorbed in what they themselves were doing, so absorbed in their ‘God projects’ that they didn’t notice God right in front of them …’ (*The Message*).

Sometimes I think we’re a bit like Israel. How do we ‘pursue a law of righteousness’ or, in plainer English, say and do all the right Christian things but subtly slip into trying to pile up credit and earn his approval? How do we try to set ourselves right with God, to earn our salvation by doing things for him? In the end, it’s a losing battle because nothing we can ever do could begin to repay what God has done for us. We will always be imperfect in the face of his perfection.

That’s why we need Jesus so desperately. Even our best acts of service and best intentions for serving him will be tainted by our human, mixed-up motives, subtle pride, and patting ourselves on the back for our faithful service.

The alternative is to make peace with our imperfections and accept our brokenness. What a relief to stop trying so hard and instead focus on just how incredibly loved we are by our Heavenly Father. As we shift our eyes away from ourselves to his great love for us, we get lost in what God has done for us through the gift of his Son. Each time we look at the cross, in worship, we can say, ‘If God loves me like that, I can trust him with my life and soul’.

The hymn *Rock of Ages*\* sums it up pretty well too.

Not the labours of my hands

Can fulfil your law’s demands;

Could my zeal no respite know,

Could my tears forever flow,

All for sin could not atone:

You must save, and You alone.

(With thanks to William Barclay for helping un-mess my brain.)

***Thank you, Jesus, that you alone did enough, loved enough, were enough. I am grateful. Amen.***

\*Augustus Montague Toplady (1740–1778)

Friday 14 October 2022

# Exclamation mark!

by Sonia Hulme

**Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out! (Romans 11:33)**

Read Romans 11:25–33

In our early married years, before children and before Netflix, my husband and I used to love watching *Seinfeld* every night on TV. Famous for being a show about nothing, the characters wrestle with everyday issues that we all sometimes think about but, in the end, are ultimately pointless.

In one episode, the female character Elaine has an argument with her boyfriend because he doesn’t use an exclamation mark when he writes down a phone message for her on an issue that she thinks is really important. She wonders what sort of person he is if he doesn’t get excited about the things she does. She says he should learn to use them ‘Like the way [she’s] talking right now. [She] would put an exclamation mark at the end of all these sentences! On this one! And that one! And on that one!’ He argues that he just takes the messages, and expecting him to capture the mood of each caller is frankly ridiculous.

In this passage from Romans, Paul’s mood is captured perfectly, and his passion is hard to miss. Four exclamation marks (or whatever the Greek equivalent was) in five sentences show great depth of feeling being conveyed.

His deep wisdom and knowledge of us!

He cannot be explained or told what to do!

His mind is far beyond ours!

Everything comes from him, happens through him and will end up in him!

Unlike all the previous chapters in which Paul is wrestling through his thoughts about God, here, he seems to push pause on that and suddenly break out into poetry/song. All his thinking, eloquent as it is, has its logical conclusion in wonder and worship. Does ours? We try to sum God up with our doctrines and interpret his intentions through our own denominational lenses, but in the end, our God refuses to fit into anyone’s box. He is full of mystery and wonder, and all our thinking about him can only end in exclamation points of praise.

***In the face of your awesome mystery, I feel quite small. But I know your heart towards me is for good, so when I cannot understand you, or your ways, let me trust in your love. Amen.***

Saturday 15 October 2022

# This is your life

by Sonia Hulme

**I lift my eyes to the hills – from where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth (Psalm 121:1,2).**

Read Psalm 121

The hills in this psalm may have looked lovely and inviting to the pilgrims walking up to Jerusalem each year. But the psalmist encouraged them not to look there as they fixed their eyes on their endpoint in Jerusalem. The hills were where little temples and shrines to other gods were located. So, were they good places to go for help and guidance? Definitely not!

What are our equivalents today? I suggest that our false gods and idol temples don’t require us to look up anywhere today. Because most of us are looking down. Maybe if it were written now, Psalm 121 would look more like this:

‘I drop my eyes to my phone – from where does my help come from?’

We don’t need to look much further than the end of our arms to find our longed-for guidance and answers to life problems. Phones can comfort us when we are lonely, entertain us when we are bored, answer all our questions about anything we’ve ever wondered and connect us in an instant with every person we have ever known in our lives. And, yes, it is also true that we can read the Bible on them, listen to sermons and encourage friends. What’s so bad about that?

There has been lots of research on this, but perhaps at the heart of it is that our phones draw us away from being fully present from where we are. Do you ever go to them for one thing and end up drifting from one screen to another, flicking, scrolling, searching … for what? They take us from being ‘now-here’ to ‘no-where’ at all and severely challenge our ability to pay attention to the people and the God right in front of us.

Next time you are tempted to ‘drop your eyes’, remember where it is that your help comes from. As tempting as the hills of idol worship was to the pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem and our modern-day idols might be to us, the satisfaction, guidance and relationship he is offering are worth us fixing our eyes straight ahead for. The heavenly Jerusalem is the endpoint of our earthly pilgrimage, and incredibly, our God both walks with us and waits for us there.

***Forgive me for the times I look everywhere else but you for all I need to flourish as your child. Help me to notice you at work in my life and the gift and opportunities you give me in the relationships right in front of me. I am blessed. Amen.***

Sunday 16 October 2022

# Encouragement in prayer

by Pastor Fraser Pearce

**And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? (Luke 18:7a)**

Read Luke 18:1–8

In this parable, Jesus gives us spiritual food to strengthen us when we feel like giving up on praying. As we listen to what Jesus says, his Spirit fills us and frees us to pray to our Father.

In the parable, Jesus talks about a corrupt judge who doesn’t care about what humans think of him and doesn’t worry about God’s judgement either. A widow, with no money or other allurement to sway the corrupt judge’s decision, appeals to him for justice. Since there’s no advantage in hearing her case, at first, he does nothing. But finally, when he sees that she will keep pestering him, he says, ‘I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming’.

Jesus tells us to listen to the unjust judge. What he means is this: If even an unjust judge in this world will eventually relent when they are pestered, how much more will the true Judge of all, who is not corrupt but truly just, give us his righteousness as we call on him? God is not an unjust judge; he is the Father of his dearly loved children.

Jesus then says, ‘And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’ We can think that the problem in prayer is God’s lack of care for us or his reluctance to give us his justice. Jesus says the real problem is our lack of trust in God.

So, listen to what Jesus says; his Spirit will free you to call out to God in trust. Jesus is your justice: in him, you have forgiveness for your sins. You have all your debt cancelled by your Father and have the gift of the Spirit who raises you to new life. It is Jesus who frees you to call on God as Father.

***Lord Jesus, thank you for your word to me. Please give me your Spirit so I may listen to you with open ears and a trusting heart and call out to my Father for his healing and life-giving justice. Amen.***

Fraser Pearce is pastor at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Flinders Street, Adelaide. He grew up in Sydney, where he attended St Mark's Lutheran Church, Epping. He was ordained in 1997 and served at St Paul's Box Hill, Victoria, and Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Bendigo, Victoria. Fraser has been married to his wife, Margaret, since 1995, and they have four children.